

# The Future of Post-Human Mass Media



# The Future of Post-Human Mass Media

## A Preface to a New Theory of Communication

By  
Peter Baofu



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To Those in the World Beyond Open and Closed Societies



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## FOREWORD

Worldwide perceptions of China were changed overnight on August 8, 2008 in the telecast of the opening ceremonies for the Olympics. Commentators expressed a profound reaction that echoed the thoughts of millions of viewers that the world was encountering a new vision of China.

Electronic media in the form of television as well as the Internet are succeeding print media in conveying messages around the globe instantaneously with a force and vitality heretofore not seen. And, as Dr. Peter Baofu points out, mass media have evinced an aggregate effect, heretofore not imagined.

In his analysis of the role of mass media, and its impact on the mind, culture, society, and nature, Dr. Baofu shows anew what a powerful tool it is and forces us to re-ask the question about the three domains of sending, connecting, and receiving—and in the process provides a refreshing new way to understand the future of mass media.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is written with the critical spirit to challenge the onventional wisdom on mass media and to replace it with a new one—just as I had done the same to other subject matters in all other previous books of mine.

Because of this persistent political incorrectness, this book receives no external funding nor help from any formal organization or institution.

The only reward is nothing other than the amazing feeling to discover something new that the world has never known.

There is one person, however, whom I deeply appreciate for his foreword, and he is Sylvan von Burg at George Washington University School of Business,.

In any event, I bear the sole responsibility for the ideas presented in this book.



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## ABBREVIATIONS

- ALD = Peter Baofu. 2007. *The Rise of Authoritarian Liberal Democracy: A Preface to a New Theory of Comparative Political Systems*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Ltd.
- BCIV = Peter Baofu. 2006. *Beyond Civilization to Post-Civilization: Conceiving a Better Model of Life Settlement to Supersede Civilization*. NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
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- BNN = Peter Baofu. 2006. *Beyond Nature and Nurture: Conceiving a Better Way to Understand Genes and Memes*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Ltd.
- BWT = Peter Baofu. 2007. *Beyond the World of Titans, and the Renaking of World Order: A Preface to a New Logic of Empire-Building*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Ltd.
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- FPHU = Peter Baofu. 2008. *The Future of Post-Human Unconsciousness: A Preface to a New Theory of Anomalous Experience*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Ltd.

• PART ONE •

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*Introduction*



# CHAPTER 1

## *INTRODUCTION—THE INFLUENCE OF MASS MEDIA*

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The term 'open society,' as defined by Karl Popper, refers to a form of social organization which recognizes that nobody has a monopoly on the truth, that different people have different views and different interests, and that there is a need for institutions to protect the rights of all people and allow them to live together in peace. In contrast, closed societies such as communism claim to be in possession of the ultimate truth and, therefore, feel justified in imposing their will on society, persecuting those who disagree and dispossessing or even eliminating segments of the population.

—George Soros (1996)

### **The Question Concerning Media Influence**

Why should mass media be informational and accurate as much as its proponents would claim—and, conversely, disinformational and propagandistic as much as its critics would argue?

Contrary to the conventional wisdom held by many since the modern era of mass media, neither of the two opposing views is correct, to the extent that a total analysis of media influence has yet to be adequately explored and understood. Something fundamentally vital to the analysis of communication has been missing.

This is not to say, however, that the literature on media studies hitherto existing in history has been much ado about nothing; on the contrary, indeed, much can be learned from different theoretical approaches in the field.

But the important point to remember here is that this book aims to show an alternative (better) way to understand the nature of mass media (which goes beyond both the pros and cons in the literature on media influence, while learning from them all).

If true, this seminal view will alter the way of how mass media are to be understood, with its enormous implications for understanding the future of communication, in a small sense—or for predicting the future of open society, in a large sense.

## **The Open-Society Mystique**

This questioning of media influence is all the more important, in light of a much misused myth about the nature of communication in “open society,” or alternatively known as, though more in a glorifying way, “the free world.”

This flattering view of open-society, in the absence of better words, can be what I originally called *the open-society mystique*, in that, somehow, mass media in open society has been dogmatically regarded, in the final analysis, as being more truthful and informational than its counterpart in “closed society.”

An excellent example of the open-society mystique concerns the “open society” argument by Karl Popper (1966) in his polemic work titled *Open Society and Its Enemies*, which was widely used during the Cold War, as a free-market ideology against the communist counterpart held in closed societies of the Eastern bloc. (P. Baofu 2004a)

George Soros (1996) is one of the contemporary believers in this tradition and once thus wrote: “The term ‘open society,’ as defined by Karl Popper, refers to a form of social organization which recognizes that nobody has a monopoly on the truth, that different people have different views and different interests, and that there is a need for institutions to protect the rights of all people and allow them to live together in peace. In contrast, closed societies such as communism claim to be in possession of the ultimate truth and, therefore, feel justified in imposing their will on society, persecuting those who disagree and dispossessing or even eliminating segments of the population.” (P. Baofu 2004a)

Yet, is this widespread belief really true, or is it a foundational mystique to cover the untruths routinely circulated in “open society”?



## Sending, Connecting, and Receiving

To start, the words “mass media” need to be clearly defined, lest any misunderstanding can easily occur.

Mass media is “a term used to denote a section of the media specifically envisioned and designed to reach a very large audience such as the population of a nation state.” (WK 2008a)

The term “was coined in the 1920s with the advent of nationwide radio networks, mass-circulation newspapers and magazines, although mass media (like books and manuscripts) were present centuries before the term became common”—as shown in *Table 1.1* on the timeline of mass media over the centuries (e.g., from the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the present). (WK 2008a)

Mass media, like communication in general, can be divided in terms of three domains for analysis, or what I want to call, in the absence of better words, namely, (a) *sending*, (b) *connecting*, and (c) *receiving*—as summarized in *Table 1.2*.

### Sending

In the domain of sending, there are several important components (e.g., “sender,” “emisor,” “encoder,” “purpose,” etc.).

Firstly, a “sender” refers to a person, organization, or any other entity when sending a message. In fact, “the sender initiates the communication process.” (G. Allen 1998)

Secondly, an “emisor” is a sending point (e.g., a broadcast tower on the sending end) where a sender transmits a message to a receiver. The counterpart of “emisor” in the domain of receiving is “destination” (e.g., a broadcast tower on the receiving end). (WK 2008b)

Thirdly, an “encoder” is “to put a message into words or images” by the sender. (G. Allen 1998) This process in the domain of sending is also understood as “codifying.” (WK 2008b)

For illustration, in information theory, “data compression” is important for “source coding,” because it ensures that “sentences will not be too long,” by requiring that “the most common words (e.g., 'a,' 'the,' 'I') should be shorter than less common words (e.g., 'benefit,' 'generation,' 'mediocre').” (WK 2008d)

And fourthly, “purpose” refers to something which “the sender intends—whether consciously or unconsciously—to accomplish...by communicating. In organizational contexts, messages typically have a definite objective: to motivate, to inform, to teach, to persuade, to entertain, or to inspire. This definite purpose is, in fact, one of the principal differences between casual conversation and managerial communication.” (G. Allen 1998)

## Connecting

In the domain of connecting, there are also several main components (e.g., “content,” “form,” “channel,” “noise,” etc.).

Firstly, “content” is “the message,” in terms of information, “that the sender wants to transmit.” (G. Allen 1998)

Secondly, “form” is “the medium,” or “the means of communication,” which can take different categories. (G. Allen 1998)

For instance, “electronic media and print media” can include “broadcasting” (e.g., “radio,” “television,” etc.), “discs” (or “tapes”), “film,” “publishing” (e.g., “books,” “magazines,” “newspapers,” etc.), “internet” (e.g., “blogs,” “podcasts,” etc.), “video games” (e.g., “the PlayStation 3,” “XBox 360,” “Wii,” etc.), “mobile phones,” etc. (WK 2008a)

Thirdly, a “channel” is the signal transmitter which passes on the message to the receiver. (G. Allen 1998) Thus, the channel specifies “the path a message follows from the sender to the receiver” and can occur in different ways (e.g., “downward,” “upward,” “horizontal,” “grapevine,” etc.). (G. Allen 1998)

As an illustration, “[s]upervisors use downward channels to send messages to employees. Employees use upward channels to send messages to supervisors. Horizontal channels are used when communicating across departmental lines, with suppliers, or with customers. An informal channel is the grapevine. It exists outside the formal channels and is used by people to transmit casual, personal, and social interchanges at work. The grapevine consists of rumors, gossip, and truthful information.” (G. Allen 1998)

In fact, channels can be divided into precise sub-divisions, because, by definition, “a channel is a division in a transmission medium so that it can be used to send multiple streams of information. For example, a radio station may broadcast at 96.1 MHz while another radio station may broadcast at 94.5 MHz. In this case, the medium has been divided by frequency and each channel has received a separate frequency to broadcast on. Alternatively, one could allocate each channel a recurring segment of time over which to broadcast—this is known as time-division multiplexing and is sometimes used in digital communication.” (WK 2008c)

And fourthly, “noise” refers to “anything that interferes with...communication.” (G. Allen 1998)

For illustration, a “digital” signal in telecommunication is better than an “analogue” signal, because, “[i]n a digital signal, the information is encoded as a set of discrete values (for example ones and zeros). During transmission the information contained in analogue signals will be degraded by noise. Conversely, unless the noise exceeds a certain threshold, the information contained in digital signals will remain intact. This noise resistance represents a

key advantage of digital signals over analogue signals.” (WK 2008c; A. Ambardar 1999)

In fact, this advantage to filter noise has something to do with “channel coding” in information theory, which requires that an information system should be “robust,” in that, “if part of a sentence is unheard or misheard due to noise...the listener should still be able to glean the meaning of the underlying message.” (WK 2008d)

## Receiving

And in the domain of receiving, there are several major components (e.g., “receiver,” “destination,” “decoder,” “feedback,” etc.).

Firstly, a “receiver” refers to “the person or group for whom the communication effort is intended.” (G. Allen 1998)

Secondly, a “destination” refers to the receiving point (e.g., a broadcast tower on the receiving end) where a receiver obtains the message (content) from the sender in communication. (WK 2008b; G. Allen 1998) The counterpart of “destination” in the domain of sending is known as “emisor.” (WK 2008b)

Thirdly, a “decoder” is the counterpart of “encoder,” this time, in the domain of receiving, in that it “decodes or makes out the meaning of the message,” often with the need of some kinds of interpretation. (G. Allen 1998) This process in the domain of receiving is also understood as “decodifying.” (WK 2008b)

And fourthly, “feedback” refers to “the transfer of information from the receiver back to the sender,” so as to ensure better mutual understanding between the sender and the receiver. (G. Allen 1998)

## The Theoretical Debate

With this introduction of the three domains for the analysis of mass media in mind—the next business concerns the theoretical debate on the question about media influence as described earlier.

Three main theoretical approaches can be summarized hereafter (and in *Table 1.3*), as a way to introduce the complicated theoretical debate on mass media, with the fourth to be my original contribution to the literature (as shown in *Table 5.1*).

These four theoretical approaches can be called, in the absence of better terms, namely, (a) the *distortion* argument, (b) the *reification* argument, (c) the *agency* argument, and (d) the *totality* argument—to be discussed hereafter, respectively.

## **The Distortion Argument**

Firstly, a major theoretical approach can be labeled, in the absence of better terms, as *the distortion argument*, in that the senders in mass media, for their own vested interests, often distort the messages sent for mass communication.

These vested interests can take different forms, be they about (a) business profits, (b) class struggle, and (c) social control, just a cite three main examples for illustration (as there can be more, of course).

(a) The first example of major vested interests concerns the “business profits” model.

An excellent example of the “business profits” model here is the 1988 book titled *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* by Noam Chomsky (1988) and Edward Herman, in which they argued that mass media often sacrifice “news quality” for “profits.” (WK 2008e) The authors, however, preferred to call their view the “propaganda” model instead

Their reasons for the focus on business profits in mass media are two-fold.

The first reason, for Chomsky and Herman, is that, since “mass media news outlets are now run by large corporations, they are under the same competitive pressures as other corporations....[Thus], the pressure to create a stable, profitable business invariably distorts the kinds of news items reported, as well as the manner and emphasis in which they are reported. This occurs not as a result of conscious design but simply as a consequence of market selection: those businesses who happen to favor profits over news quality survive, while those that present a more accurate picture of the world tend to become marginalized.” (WK 2008e)

And the second reason for Chomsky and Herman is that there is also “the dependency of mass media news outlets upon major sources of news, particularly the government. If a particular outlet is in disfavor with a government, it can be subtly 'shut out', and other outlets given preferential treatment. Since this results in a loss in news leadership, it can also result in a loss of readership/viewership. That can itself result in a loss of advertising revenue, which is the primary income for most of the mass media (newspapers, magazines, television). To minimize the possibilities of lost revenue, therefore, outlets will tend to report news in a tone more favorable to government and business, and giving unfavorable news about government and business less emphasis.” (WK 2008e)

(b) A second example of major vested interests involves the “class struggle” model.

A well-known illustration of the “class struggle” model here is of course the work by Karl Marx (1947), who famously wrote in *The German Ideology* that “[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class

which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.” (QB 2008)

For instance, mass media in bourgeois society is essentially the superstructure for the economic base of capitalism—and, by implication, for the benefits of the ruling capitalist class.

(c) And a third example of major vested interests refers to the “social control” model propounded by prominent social scientists in the Frankfurt school (e.g., Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse—and later, though to a smaller extent, Jürgen Habermas, because the latter holds certain views which go beyond, or rebelled against, those of his predecessors).

The “social control” model was developed by the Frankfurt School which “came into existence in order to explain the success of Nazism in Weimar Germany. It sees the loss of individuality through decline of privacy as the main cause of dependence on great mass organisations. Habermas to a certain extent depends on some early critiques of the media from the ‘Frankfurt School’, such as that of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse. For these three, media was a ‘culture industry’ which was creating an impact on passive individuals. These individuals merely absorb any information they are exposed to.” (WK 2008)

Yet, all three examples of the distortion argument (i.e., the “business profits” model, the “class struggle” model, and the “social control” model) has a fatal weakness, in assuming that the masses somehow cannot think well or do not have the autonomy to interpret information in ways which differ drastically from the intentionality of the senders in mass communication.

## The Reification Argument

Secondly, another theoretical approach can be referred to, in the absence of better terms, as *the reification argument*, in that mass media are part of the reality that they are supposed to report for mass communication, to the extent that media influence can go beyond the mere content of communication. The focus on content as conventionally understood is therefore misplaced, and something more important is naively neglected.

The difference between the distortion argument (as described in the previous section) and the reification argument (in this section) is that, for the reification argument, the focus is more on the domain of connecting, whereas, for the distortion argument, the focus is more on the domain of sending.—although both share the ideas of distortion and reification too.

This clarification aside—the worship of misplaced reality in the reification argument can take different forms, be they about (a) the role of the medium and (b) the fabrication of hyper-reality, just to cite two examples for illustration.

(a) A good illustration of the role of the medium is none other than the work by Marshall McLuhan, who made a name of himself when he summarized his argument in his 1964 book titled *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, by saying that “the medium is the message.”

McLuhan wanted to study “the influence of communication media independent of their content. His famous slogan...calls attention to this intrinsic effect of communications media.” (WK 2008f)

For instance, in his 1962 book titled *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, McLuhan “takes pains to reveal how communication technology (alphabetic writing, the printing press, and the electronic media) affects cognitive organization, which in turn has profound ramifications for social organization.” (WK 2008f)

As he wrote, “if a new technology extends one or more of our senses outside us into the social world, then new ratios among all of our senses will occur in that particular culture. It is comparable to what happens when a new note is added to a melody. And when the sense ratios alter in any culture then what had appeared lucid before may suddenly become opaque, and what had been vague or opaque will become translucent.”

With the analysis of the movable type as an example, McLuhan showed us that “the invention of movable type greatly accelerated, intensified, and ultimately enabled cultural and cognitive changes that had already been taking place since the invention and implementation of the alphabet, by which McLuhan means phonemic orthography. (McLuhan is careful to distinguish the phonetic alphabet from logographic/logogrammic writing systems, like hieroglyphics or ideograms.)” (WK 2008f)

With the work of *Prints and Visual Communication* on printing technology by William Ivins (1953) in mind, McLuhan thus argued: “[Ivins] not only notes the ingraining of lineal, sequential habits, but, even more important, points out the visual homogenizing of experience of print culture, and the relegation of auditory and other sensuous complexity to the background....The technology and social effects of typography incline us to abstain from noting interplay and, as it were, 'formal' causality, both in our inner and external lives. Print exists by virtue of the static separation of functions and fosters a mentality that gradually resists any but a separative and compartmentalizing or specialist outlook.” (WK 2008f)

McLuhan also used the same view on the role of the medium to further argue that the rise of “electronic media” in modern times has also created an “electronic interdependence,” which has the function to “replace visual culture,” so “humankind will move from individualism and fragmentation to a collective identity” in a “global village.” (WK 2008f)